

“A Blank Slate”: Preparing for Tokyo 2021 during COVID-19

Abstract

This article presents a case study of an applied consultancy experience with WL; an Olympic athlete preparing for Tokyo 2021. WL sought psychological support after decreases in performance and well-being forced them to consider their future as an athlete. COVID-19 and the lockdown of the United Kingdom were highly influential to the consultancy process; providing WL with the opportunity to explore their identity in the absence of sport. WL framed their emergence from the lockdown as a ‘Blank Slate’, which was a critical moment allowing them to ‘find themselves on and off the mat’. The sport psychologist’s existential philosophy is presented and discussed in detail. Furthermore, reflections are provided by WL’s strength and conditioning coach about the referral process and by WL themselves about the efficacy of the interventions. The importance of supporting both the person and the performer when working with aspiring Olympic athletes is also discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19, identity, critical moments, authenticity, balance, control

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Context

COVID-19

With millions infected and billions forced to self-isolate (Buchholz, 2020), the consequences of the COVID-19 virus were felt by everyone around the world. As the Olympic qualifiers (originally scheduled to take place in Wuhan, China) were postponed, Olympic athletes faced uncertainty about the qualification process and their future in sport altogether (Schinke et al., 2020a). Many elite athletes experienced social isolation, loneliness, fear, anxiety, and a decrease in motivation, as they searched for meaning in absence of sport (Schinke et al., 2020b). This critical pause (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021) forced athletes to stop, reflect, and adapt to an unprecedented period in their careers. During this period of adaptation, through reflection, some athletes were able to respond positively to the virus; gaining a new appreciation for their sport (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021) and recognising gaps in their Olympic performance (Schinke et al., 2020a). However, others struggled to adapt to the ‘new-normal’ and experienced heightened anxiety (Mehrsafar et al., 2020), placing them at a higher risk of poor mental health (Frank et al., 2020).

The Practitioner

My approach to practice has been highlighted in previous applied case studies (Wadsworth 2019; Wadsworth et al., 2020). However, this case study marked the start of my professional career as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered). I successfully passed my Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology on the 31st March 2020 and ‘celebrated’ this achievement during the strictest of lockdown periods in the United Kingdom. Successfully gaining chartered status did not change my approach to practice, but preparing for, and engaging in, the viva

examination did allow me to reflect on how I articulated this approach to others. The ‘*ABC* principle’ is one way of understanding my philosophy of practice.

The *ABC* principle (*Authenticity, Balance, and Control*) draws heavily from the existential literature (Nesti, 2004). *Authenticity* is required from both the practitioner and the client, who must engage in the consultancy process together; bringing their true self to each session and engaging as best they can in an open, honest, and transparent encounter (Buber, 1970). This meeting of two people, being unapologetically themselves, is not easy, but if achieved can create the necessary foundations for successful service delivery (Fromm, 1994; Spinelli, 1996). Authenticity allows for the development of the necessary relationship required between the practitioner and client and often becomes the intervention itself (Buber, 1970). Practitioners who demonstrate complete presence in the encounter allow clients to confidently and comfortably engage with the support by telling their story. *Balance* draws on the identity literature (Wylleman et al., 2004) and highlights the importance of supporting the person and the performer (Frieson & Orlick, 2010) by appreciating the link between performance and well-being (Brady & Maynard, 2010). This is central to my philosophy and belief system; *we work with people who are very good at sport, but sport should not define them*. Clients unable to discuss who they are outside of a sporting context may be demonstrating a complete performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009) or foreclosed identity (identifying with or committing to an identity, role, or occupation, without engaging in exploratory behaviour) (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), which in some cases can be contributing towards the challenges they are experiencing. Based on this approach, broadening an individuals’ identity can help provide them with perspective. As they start to view themselves as more than just an athlete, they are able to switch off from their sport and receive critical feedback. They are able to view good and bad performances in a more balanced way. Finding a balance between their sport and their broader life serves to improve

both their performance and well-being. *Control* refers to another key aspect of the existential literature and one of my own most strongly held beliefs about human beings; *we have free will*. This free will means we have freedom and control, but it also means we must take responsibility for our actions. Taking responsibility can often cause anxiety (May, 1977). Athletes face a variety of critical moments throughout their careers (Nesti et al., 2012) and must acknowledge the control they have in these moments (Schneider & May, 1995). This can often require the practitioner to ask some very challenging questions of the client, which can be deeply uncomfortable for both people involved. This type of support requires a very strong professional relationship between the practitioner and client and does not work without a level of authenticity discussed above (Cohn, 1997). All elements of this philosophy of practice were required at different points throughout this consultancy process as both me and WL navigated the ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic.

The Client

The client involved in this case study will be referred to as WL. WL has given verbal and written consent for this case study to be written and published. However, as WL is a high-profile athlete and easily identifiable within their sporting community and beyond, a variety of information (gender, age, sport etc.) has not been included in this case study. To maintain confidentiality, the context surrounding WL's situation will be presented broadly and some information will be excluded from the write-up. For example, WL's sport will be referred to broadly as a 'combat sport' for the purposes of this case study.

Consultancy Process

The consultancy process ran from the 18th February 2020 to 15th September 2020, during which time WL and I engaged in 12 sessions together. Only three of the sessions were conducted face-to-face. The majority of the sessions were conducted online due to lockdown restrictions and to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The boundaries between the

different elements of the consultancy process are rarely linear in nature (Keegan, 2015) and the COVID-19 pandemic only served to increase the complexity of this process. The changing circumstances surrounding the virus meant that WL's needs were constantly changing too. WL was referred to see me prior to the start of lockdown, with needs unrelated to the COVID-19 virus. The national lockdown of the United Kingdom was announced on the 23rd March 2020; three sessions into the consultancy process. This required us to adapt and use an online platform to conduct the sessions. Moreover, the consultancy process continued after the lockdown had ended and WL had returned to training. In an attempt to capture this ever-changing situation (and the changing needs of WL), the consultancy process is presented in two distinct sections below; pre and post lockdown. Throughout the following sections, WL's thoughts, and reflections (collected during an 'exit interview' at the end of the consultancy process) will be presented in quotes to provide an insight into the efficacy of the intervention. The reflections of Adam (WL's strength and conditioning coach and my colleague from the University) will also be included as second author, because he was an integral part of the referral and intake process.

Pre-Lockdown

Intake

WL was referred to see me by Adam. At WL's most recent competition (as a result of a change in nutritionist) WL had weighed in almost 10kg over their fighting weight. This meant WL had been forced, by their coach, to engage in dangerous weight loss strategies immediately prior to their competition. WL managed to make weight for the competition, but this experience, and their subsequent poor performance at the competition (due to severe dehydration), had made them question their future in the sport. WL had begun to dissociate from their sport and was beginning to lose trust in the people around them. WL had a very

strong professional relationship with Adam (strengthened by the weight loss experience) and only agreed to engage in sport psychology support if he was present at our meetings.

Adam's Reflections. Following WL's latest competition, WL and I had a number of discussions reflecting on what had happened. WL stated that, because of this experience, they felt apprehensive about the upcoming competitions scheduled for the remainder of 2020.

Alongside this, WL's attitude also seemed to be shifting more dramatically in training too.

Although the effort being applied to training was good, the optimism and positivity seemed to have faded somewhat. The point at which WL brought up the possibility of leaving the sport

altogether, was when I felt WL's psychological needs outweighed the support I was able to offer. Whilst I felt I could provide support in terms of friendship; it was clear that expert help was needed. As WL's needs were now beyond the scope of my practice, I sought the support of Nick. Initially I went to Nick for advice and guidance about how I could support WL

further. I made this decision because WL had previously stated they had trust issues (heavily influenced by recent events), which meant a referral might be met with scepticism. However,

as the weeks went on, and WL was not improving, I decided to discuss the benefits of full

psychological support with WL. After numerous conversations WL reluctantly agreed to

attend an informal meeting with Nick, on the condition that I too attended. During the initial

meeting, Nick clearly outlined his expectations of WL, and stated his approach to support and

what he could offer. This seemed to strike a chord with WL, who was now receptive to the

idea of attending a more formal intake session (still on the condition that I too attended). I

had previously never attended a psychological session, such as this, because normally

meetings between a sport psychologist and the athlete are conducted in privacy and under

strict confidentiality. However, due to the circumstances, Nick had agreed I could attend to

ensure WL was comfortable. Prior to the session, Nick and I agreed that I would also engage

in the session by answering the questions asked. The idea behind this was, if I was engaged in

148 the process and demonstrated emotion, vulnerability, and acted in an honest manner, this
149 would encourage WL to be more open and trusting of Nick and the process as a whole. There
150 was an immediate effect, as WL began to engage in discussions once I had initially answered
151 questions. Over the proceeding weeks, WL became confident enough and trusting enough in
152 Nick, where they felt I did not need to be present at the sessions.

153 *Intake (Continued...)*

154 Despite agreeing to attend, WL was still very resistant and sceptical in engaging with
155 psychological support. This highlights just how important Adam's support and
156 encouragement were in these early stages:

157 Well, I was resistant against it because I couldn't really see how anyone else could
158 help my problems, because to me, it was my problem and my situation and nobody
159 else could understand or...fix it...also I'd had previous help with other circumstances
160 before and never really found that helpful and I've never really been open to talk to
161 people, so that was a big step for me...the reason why I ended up finally coming, was,
162 well it was a really big push from Adam really, because he was obviously thinking
163 that it would really help and I think it was because I'd reached such a low that I kind
164 of felt like I had no other branch to reach out for, for help, because I was very close to
165 quitting my sport and I was pretty much done and the one last chance that I had really
166 was this...

167 Agreeing that Adam could attend the meetings with WL had the potential to provide a
168 different dynamic to the intake session. Engaging with an athlete and a member of their
169 support staff was not something I had ever experienced before and so I took some time,
170 before the first session, to reflect on how I would approach the meeting and what ethical
171 implications this could have. It had quickly become apparent that WL was uncomfortable
172 with the idea of seeking sport psychology support. I needed to find a way to make WL feel

173 more comfortable and so decided to conduct an intake session with WL and Adam
174 simultaneously. As Adam has suggested, the idea behind this approach was that if WL saw
175 Adam engaging openly with the questions, they would feel more comfortable to do the same.
176 For this to work, I had to explain that the boundaries of confidentiality existed between all
177 three parties present. I also decided to ask Adam the questions first to allow WL time to
178 reflect on the question and feel more comfortable when it was their time to answer. This
179 approach seemed to work well, based on WL's engagement with the session. Adam played a
180 vital role in the initial success of the consultancy process. His openness and vulnerability in
181 discussing his own life and challenges was fundamental to WL allowing themselves to fully
182 engage with the first two sessions. As a result, I was able to gain a comprehensive insight into
183 WL's background and journey and we began to establish a good professional relationship.

184 When asking my opening question (*"can you tell me about your journey, in and*
185 *outside of sport, which has led you to this point?"*) WL struggled to discuss anything other
186 than their life as an athlete. It immediately became apparent that their identity was strongly
187 associated with their role as an athlete (they were unable to demonstrate the *balance* that was
188 so fundamental to my philosophy of practice) and even when promoted was unable to
189 articulate who they were away from their sport. It was at this point in the session that I
190 decided to use a 'value card' activity to encourage dialogue and increase self-reflection. This
191 activity involves an athlete placing value cards into one of three columns; (a) *very important*
192 *to me*, (b) *important to me*, and (c) *not important to me*. This seemingly simple task has been
193 highly effective in previous sessions and worked well here. To begin with, it engages the
194 client by encouraging them to 'do' something, which seemed to make WL more comfortable.
195 Furthermore, the physical act of moving the cards, and having a visual, seemed to stimulate
196 dialogue. Something I had not anticipated was just how important Adam would be to this
197 process. He had known WL for three years and so was able to reflect and articulate how WL

had changed during this time. For example, when WL placed ‘risk’ (“*to take risks and chances*”) in the *very important* category, Adam was able to challenge this and state that taking risks was something WL had stopped doing since their podium finish at their last major competition:

I liked seeing it [the cards], because then I could categorise it and break it down and then when Adam was there, it was great, because he obviously knows me from before this and was like ‘wow, hold on...you’re not’ and then that made me think, well I think I am this, but clearly I’m slipping, even though I used to be one of those qualities...I was very appreciative that Adam was there for that, because it was kind of like having that outsiders view...obviously knowing me well enough over the last three years, as an athlete, and I’ve been training with him for years, and for him to actually see the differences in me...that made me more aware of them...so that set me goals to get that quality back, if I felt it was important

Needs Analysis

The use of these value cards continued across two sessions (at WL’s request) and soon the intake progressed into the needs analysis. One of the most significant parts of this progression through the consultancy process was when WL requested to attend the third session alone. It was at this point that I knew I had developed a good relationship with WL, because, despite still being uncomfortable, they agreed to attend on a one-to-one basis. A more traditional approach to confidentiality (between sport psychologist and client), my lack of connection with their sport, and the relationship we were able to build in the previous sessions, provided WL with the confidence that no information would get back to their sporting community and that they could continue the sessions alone:

Obviously we’ve got confidentiality as long as everything is safe, so I felt quite confident that you would upkeep that as well, even if you were considered to be work

223 colleagues or friends with Adam, like I knew that it wouldn't go anywhere, and then
224 there was some stuff that I don't really like talking about, like my history, even with
225 Adam, even though he is a friend and someone I can trust, he is very involved with
226 [sport], whereas you had no connection to [sport] you know, the coaches didn't mean
227 anything to you, they were just a name that you'd kind of met, whereas he was a big
228 part of their programme, so even though I knew he wouldn't tell anyone, it was
229 just...there was just some stuff that I didn't want him to know or judge me ever
230 for...so I was nervous to go to the third session on my own...very nervous [laughter]
231 and uncomfortable, but because you were understanding it and listening, it was easier
232 to come to the sessions...and the relationship was so important, for me personally,
233 because I don't have many people that I have a connection with that I feel
234 comfortable talking to, like I am a very closed off person, so I think building up that
235 relationship was going to be really big, otherwise it just wouldn't have happened, I
236 just shut people out

237 The relationship WL and I had been able to develop ensured I was able conduct a
238 comprehensive needs analysis. From an existential perspective this requires a deep
239 exploration of the person and their context. As an existential sport psychologist, I take the
240 time to understand my client as a person and a performer. Who are they? Who do they want
241 to be? To what extent does sport give their life meaning and purpose? I never approach a
242 session with a set of pre-determined questions but instead demonstrate presence by engaging
243 authentically, spontaneously, and empathetically with the client to understand their
244 experiences (Nesti, 2004). For example, as the use of the values card activity continued, it
245 was becoming increasingly apparent that there was a disparity between who WL was and
246 who they wanted to be. Recent events had meant their sport was no longer providing them
247 with a purposeful and meaningful life and their lack of an identity outside that of 'athlete'

248 was causing significant decreases in performance and overall happiness. There was one
249 particular moment during the needs analysis when WL admitted (after a long pause) “I just
250 don’t know who I am anymore”. Sensing that this was significant moment in the session and
251 a critical moment in understanding WL’s story, my role was to immerse myself in WL’s
252 experience and explore this in more detail. I attempted to do this by asking questions like;
253 ‘are you living authentically; are you behaving in a way that represents who you are and who
254 you want to be?’, ‘to what extent is the life you are living the way you want your life to be
255 lived?’, ‘what are the consequences of inaction?’, and ‘what is preventing you from changing,
256 growing, and developing as a person?’. This deep and meaningful encounter allowed me to
257 fully understand WL’s needs.

258 Increased Expectation. Prior to our first meeting, WL had finished in a podium position at
259 a major international competition; their best professional achievement to date. However, in
260 the period following this medal, they had experienced a reduction in performance, and a
261 number of professional (making weight, conflict with coaches etc.) and personal challenges
262 (conflict with their partner, lack of communication with family and friends etc.). These
263 challenges had subsequently prevented them from attaining the same level of performance in
264 recent competitions and made them question their future in the sport. WL described their
265 recent medal as going from ‘invisible to visible’. Suddenly WL found themselves in the
266 spotlight. Expectation (from themselves, their coaches, their governing body, and their
267 parents) about subsequent performances had increased dramatically. This increased
268 expectation was causing WL to experience heightened anxiety at both training and
269 competitions, which was preventing them performing to their potential. In addition to this,
270 WL felt they were now being ‘pulled in different directions’ by their coaches. Coaches, who
271 had not previously engaged much with WL, were now ‘attaching’ themselves to WL (as a
272 way to increase their own reputation), which meant WL was now receiving more feedback

and at times contradictory advice during training and competitions. WL admitted to wanting to avoid conflict and so decided not to address this problem with their coaching staff (one example of how WL was avoiding risk as Adam had stated in the second session). However, WL now felt they were beginning to perform the sport for other people and not for themselves. Furthermore, as a way of trying to meet the heightened expectations being placed on them, WL felt that they now needed to be training all the time, so other athletes could not gain a competitive advantage. The increased pressure WL was placing on themselves also meant they rarely (if ever) switched off from their sport and would regularly think about mistakes and worry about critical feedback from their coaches. WL summed these challenges up towards the end of the session: “I’ve lost myself on and off the mat”.

Case Formulation

Determining the aim of the intervention was a collaborative process between me and WL. First, I listened and attempted to understand and make sense of the WL’s experiences. This was achieved across three separate sessions but continued throughout the consultancy process as the needs and experiences of WL changed. Secondly, I asked WL what they wanted to achieve by engaging in the support. WL responded by reaffirming their earlier statement “I’ve lost myself on and off the mat and I want to get my old self back”. Thirdly, I attempted to make sense of WL’s experiences through an existential lens. For example, before engaging with sport psychology support, WL was almost certain that they no longer wanted to continue their career as an athlete. This critical moment (the choice about whether or not to continue their athletic career) and awareness that they had responsibility for the consequences of this decision, meant WL was experiencing a significant amount of anxiety. As a way of coping with this critical moment, WL was living their life inauthentically by avoiding the decision and associated anxiety. Based on the needs of WL and using existential themes (meaning, anxiety, authenticity, death etc.) as a framework, it was clear that a focus

on the person behind the performer was initially required here. WL and I agreed that the initial aim of the intervention needed to be a focus on their well-being and happiness. We decided to concentrate on exploring who they were away from their sport so that WL could be more *authentic* (be more like the person they wanted to be), find *balance* (understand who they were in the absence of their sport), and finally acknowledge the *control* they had regarding their decision to continue their athletic career. WL simply wanted to be happier (through acting authentically) and, secondary to that, potentially start enjoying the sport again. To meet the needs of WL (“I’ve lost myself on and off the mat”), we decided to describe this phase of the support as; “finding yourself off the mat”.

Lockdown (as Intervention)

On Monday 23rd March 2020 (three sessions into the consultancy process), the United Kingdom was forced into a national lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many athletes, WL found the initial stages of the lockdown to be very challenging (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). WL was becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to train. Despite many other countries also being in a national lockdown at the time, WL still seemed to worry that their opponents would be using this time to improve and gain a competitive advantage. WL also admitted that only speaking to family and friends during this time meant WL was unable to engage in ‘meaningful conversation’. Perhaps most importantly (in relation to the agreed aims of the intervention) was the idea that WL felt they had completely lost their athletic identity. Subsequent sessions were used to explore this further and to support WL in navigating the ever-changing COVID-19 circumstances. There would simply be no better opportunity to focus on who WL was away from sport than a complete lockdown of the country where WL had no access to their sport. I helped WL reflect on this period of their career by asking questions like; ‘who are you without sport?’, ‘is your decision to leave the sport being influenced by factors in or outside of your control?’,

323 ‘to what extent are you avoiding the anxiety associated with this challenging period of your
324 career?’, and ‘will this decision to leave the sport help you become more like the person you
325 want to be?’ After an initial period of adaptation and exploration, we worked hard to frame
326 the lockdown as an opportunity to meet the aims we had discussed in our previous sessions
327 (“finding yourself off the mat”):

328 As we’ve discussed before, when the lockdown happened, it was actually quite
329 beneficial, because then everything got pulled away, so I had time to focus on who I
330 was and like you had said, one of the big things was trying to find who I was outside
331 of being an athlete, whereas before all I would ever do is define myself as a [athlete]
332 and all anyone would ever talk to me about was [sport] and nothing else; including
333 my family and friends and everyone...so I think the lockdown really helped, because,
334 whereas before, I wasn’t enjoying practice... during lockdown I was getting
335 frustrated, I was starting to miss [sport] and that was a really big sign for me...I was
336 really happy with the idea of being frustrated and missing training, which gave me
337 that branch to hold, that I don’t actually hate the sport and want to quit...I think I just
338 need to figure a lot of stuff out and to be honest, when I did stop [sport] I did feel like
339 I lost a part of my identity, of who I was...even though I didn’t want it to be all of me,
340 I still find my sport to be a big part of who I am and that has developed me to be who
341 I am and who I want to be as well

342 This was a defining moment for WL. Being forced to disengage from their sport and having
343 time away from training and competitions made them realise just how much they would miss
344 it if they decided to stop. This glimmer of hope was all WL needed to realise that they wanted
345 to continue their professional career. The lockdown had given us a perfect opportunity to
346 work towards, and meet, the initial aim of the intervention. When the national lockdown was
347 lifted, WL returned to training and we agreed to review the aim of the intervention and start

working towards Tokyo 2021. WL excitedly described this moment as a “Blank Slate”. This description became a critical moment in the consultancy process, as it symbolised hope, progress, and change; allowing us to begin focusing on the next chapter of WL’s professional career.

Post-Lockdown

Needs Analysis

The “Blank Slate” became a regular feature of our subsequent meetings. For WL the “Blank Slate” allowed them to reconnect with the meaning and purpose they had previously attributed to their sport. Post-lockdown, WL was happy and excited to return to training (despite having some anxiety about being rusty, lacking fitness, and potentially gaining weight). WL reflected positively on their return to the sport and was now beginning to focus on the Olympic qualifiers in 2021. WL had even requested (politely and respectfully) to not be weighed on their immediate return to training, which was another significant moment, demonstrating WL’s increased authenticity and alignment to the person they wanted to be:

I’m now really wanting to give this a try again...obviously I won’t forget what’s happened in the past, but use it to kind of create a clean slate, a blank slate, so with my head coach, I created the blank slate to try and move on, but also to better myself from it, so instead of just having this hatred towards him and shutting him out each time and then going back into this hole of...“he’s doing this and I hate the sport”, it was more “well what can I do about it? Even if I can’t change him, I can change myself to make it better for me” so I wanted to be able to stand up for myself and do what was right for me as an athlete, whilst also being respectful to the coaches...so I kept blank slating everything, so I’m trying to blank slate my competitions now and I was trying to build my old self back, you know, with my attitude and being happier and enjoying practice, but then bettering my old self by having more respect for

myself as an athlete, which I realised that I really needed to do...I think I lacked that, I had so much trust in everyone else that they knew the best thing for me, when really I needed to listen to myself...obviously keep my eyes and ears open to them, because they can guide me, but at the end of the day, I know me better than anyone else, as you said...

WL and I both agreed that this was an opportune moment to adapt the focus of the sessions and start working towards “finding yourself on the mat”. Since their biggest success (medalling at a major international tournament) WL had performed poorly at subsequent competitions. The expectation and pressure surrounding their performances was causing WL to experience significant anxiety immediate before and during their fights. WL described how they had previously and successfully been able to adopt a ‘fuck-it’ attitude in fights, which allowed them to be reactive, aggressive, and on the front foot. However, now WL admitted that they had become hesitant, afraid of making mistakes, and lacked the concentration required to win fights consistently. To gain a better understanding of WL’s specific performance related needs, I introduced them to a ‘Control Map’ activity (Turner, 2020). The ‘Control Map’ requires an athlete to reflect on what they believe are the most important factors influencing their performance and how much *control* they have over these specific factors. Using sticky notes, WL colour coordinated these factors (green, orange, and red). WL then placed these factors on a whiteboard, with the green factors placed closest to their name in the middle of the board (symbolising a factor WL had most control of), the orange factors placed slightly further away (symbolising a factor WL had some control of), and the red factors placed furthest away (symbolising a factor WL had no control of) (see Figure 1.).

Insert Figure 1. here

The dialogue surrounding this activity (“are you doing everything you can to control the greens?” “are you able to take more control for the oranges?” “is there anything you can do to

control the reds?”) allowed us to decide on the next aim of the consultancy process, which we described as; *regulate anxiety to maximise performance*. We agreed to break this overall aim down into three smaller aims: (a) understand what level of anxiety is required to maximise performance, (b) understand what aspects (internally and externally) impact and alter this anxiety, and (c) understand what techniques/strategies can be used to regulate this anxiety:

I really liked the control map...I think it helped break down what I felt was important to performance in competition...and then comparing my successful competitions, which was [international competition] to my not so successful competitions recently made me realise I was letting other people dictate to me, whereas at [international competition] it was all about me, I did what I needed to do, whereas now I let someone dictate to me, so I really liked seeing the factors important to performance and colour coordinating them really helped...the reds ones, were the factors that had massive impact on performance, but a lot of it is due to an external source, which I can't actually control, but I needed to find ways to help myself without that external having an effect, so family or coaches, I can't change them, but I can change how I take the pressure and the expectations and stuff and obviously that set me goals to start working towards that area

The Intervention

In the absence of competitions (because of a further rise in COVID-19 cases globally), WL and I were unable to directly work on most of the factors discussed on the ‘Control Map’, as we lacked the competitive context. Despite this, WL did highlight that they felt self-talk had been a huge part their podium performance, so I introduced WL to the concept of storytelling as a form of self-talk (Tovares, 2010). I explained to WL that this form of self-talk required an individual to create and take *control* of their own narrative, by

actively adopting the role of both narrator and main character within their own story. The narrator writes the story and the main character does everything they can to live out this story in the real-world. The most important idea here was that, no matter which role WL adopted, they had *control*. WL practiced this in the following weeks and reflected positively on the impact it was beginning to have:

The way you described that with the narrator and main character was really helpful...at first I thought “this is really cheesy” [laughter], but I was actually portraying it back and was like “this is actually really true” and a good way to look at it and like I’ve said before I used to use self-talk, and I think I started taking critique so negatively and it started to build and build that the self-talk sort of disappeared and it was a bit tricky at first to try and be positive, but I was able to take almost like a step back and breathe and be like “look, yes you missed it here, but next time will come easier” and I think my self-talk has had a very positive outcome because I’ve noticed a lot of compliments from my coaches...they’ve noticed that I’m trying new moves and even if I miss the move they’re like “unlucky you’ll get it next time” and I’m catching all those comments, whereas before they’d say it and all I’d hear was the negative side

WL is now approaching training with more of a purpose and most importantly enjoying the sport again. It is difficult to know, because of the unpredictable situation surrounding COVID-19, if and when competitions will resume for WL any time soon. Nevertheless, we have agreed to stay in touch until the next competition is confirmed and then continue work towards Tokyo 2021.

Evaluating the Intervention(s)

446 Gaining subjective feedback from my clients is, for me, the most important way to
447 judge the quality of the support I have provided. As part of the ‘exit interview’, I asked WL
448 to reflect on what they felt had changed the most as a result of the support I had provided:

449 I’m happier as a person...I was very low...obviously athletes have high stages and
450 low stages, but it was how long that low stage had gone on and that was worrying
451 me...I don’t feel that anymore... I still have my downs, like I had a low not that long
452 ago, but I got out of it straight away, which was good...so I’m happier, which is
453 probably one of my biggest things...I’ve found yet again my passion for
454 training...I’m happy that I’m nervous about competing, because that means I
455 care...more than anything I’m just happy that I’ve started to notice some of my own
456 attributes are coming back, like I’m taking more of a risk in training, which will
457 hopefully come out in competition...I think my biggest one is standing up for
458 myself... I used to let a lot of people walk all over me, as an athlete, because I just
459 held too much respect, whereas now, I’ll ask myself, “is this worth fighting for?” And
460 I think that’s one of the biggest things, because that was the thing that was killing my
461 career as an athlete the most, was that I was just not expressing my own opinion,
462 whereas if I think I’m not ready for a competition now, I would probably...no I
463 would, not probably [laughter]...go to my coaches and say “look, I’m not ready to
464 step back on the mat yet, because of this this and this” so I’m confident enough to
465 speak up for myself, but still be really respectful, which is one thing I never wanted to
466 lose. In all honesty, I’ve appreciated the way you approached it, like we worked on
467 the personal level first and then you started digging more into performance and why I
468 was getting this anxiety and when you asked me for my best competition and then my
469 worst competition and the way I felt...I think that was one of the biggest realisations
470 and helpful things that you’d done, because it made me remember back to how I was

during [international competition] and then see where I'm at now and knowing that you're trying to help me get back to that, it's really good

Conclusion

This case study presents an applied consultancy experience with WL; an Olympic athlete preparing for Tokyo 2021 during COVID-19. There are a number of lessons to be learnt from this experience.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons to consider is that this work would not have been possible without the support Adam demonstrated during the referral process and throughout the initial stages of service-delivery. Adam was able to recognise WL needed additional support and then encouraged WL to engage fully in the intake and needs analysis process. His willingness to go above and beyond (not only facilitating a referral but accompanying WL to the first two sessions) should not be underestimated. Without Adam there would have been no service-delivery to write about. Sport psychology practitioners often have limited time and contact with athletes and so the athlete's wider support staff are likely to be the first to recognise the need for additional psychological support (Morton & Roberts, 2013). Sport psychology practitioners should consider working directly with support staff to increase awareness and understanding of the psychological challenges athletes might experience when preparing for major international events and to facilitate the referral process.

Another key aspect that contributed towards the success of this consultancy experience was that WL was supported as both a person and a performer. My existential philosophy of practice (the *ABC* principle) allowed me to meet the changing needs of WL in the absence of, and return to, sport. In many ways, the complete lockdown of the United Kingdom facilitated this process by giving WL time to reflect on their identity and the meaning sport provided their life. By recognising that WL was more than just an athlete, they were able to demonstrate authenticity and balance. Time to reflect and evaluate also ensured

496 WL's emergence from the lockdown could be framed as a 'Blank Slate' allowing WL to
497 achieve the aims of the intervention by 'finding themselves on and off the mat'. Olympic
498 athletes are people who are very good at their sport.

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